

Tough stand on creationism

The Royal Society acted swiftly to defend perceived damage to its reputation. **Nigel Williams** reports.

British biologists look worryingly at the developments on the issue of creationism and intelligent design in the US, where constant pressure from powerful conservative Christian groups seeks to continue to set a scientific alternative to evolution. There is wider support for evolutionary theory in the UK, but creationists are pushing their agenda there: lavish textbooks have been sent to schools from an unknown source advocating intelligent design and creationism. There are some academic advocates and several Moslem groups back the ideas.

It was then perhaps no surprise that Britain's science academy, the Royal Society, reacted quickly when media reports appeared claiming that its director of science education had suggested that science lessons should tackle the issue of creationism. Michael Reiss had been speaking at Britain's annual science festival in Liverpool. He expressed his concern that around one in ten children come from families with creationist beliefs. "My experience after having tried to teach biology for 20 years is if one simply gives the impression that such children are wrong, then they are not going to learn much about the science," he said.

Reiss, who is an ordained Church of England minister, told the meeting that science teachers should not see creationism as a "misconception" but as an alternative "world view". He added that he was not advocating that

the same time should be allocated to teaching creationism or intelligent design as to evolution.

But the reporting of creationism as a "world view" angered some scientists. The Royal Society stood by Reiss initially, insisting that he had not departed from its official policy and that his remarks had been misinterpreted. But pressure from some fellows led quickly to a change of position.

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And, within a week of his talk, Reiss resigned. In a statement the society said: "Some of Michael Reiss's recent comments, on the issue of creationism in schools, while speaking as the Royal Society's director of education, were open to misinterpretation. While it was not his intention, this led to damage to the society's reputation. As a result, Professor Reiss and the Royal Society have agreed that, in the best interests of the society, he will step down immediately as director of education."

But not all scientists agreed with this decision. Lord Winston, Professor of Science and Society at Imperial College London, who is not a fellow of the Royal Society, said, as reported in *The Times*, "I fear that the Royal Society may have only diminished itself. This individual was arguing that we should engage with and address public misconceptions about science — something that the Royal Society should applaud."

After the initial press reports and headlines that led to the resignation, the *Guardian* newspaper in a leader column also gave its support to Reiss. "He did not say that creationism was scientific. He did not advocate including it in the scientific curriculum. And he categorically denied that creationism and evolution deserved equal time," the article said.

"The subtlety of Prof Reiss's position was lost in some media reports, while the headlines in many newspapers — including this one — did not convey the nuance of his message."



Controversy: Professor Michael Reiss resigned from the Royal Society as its director of education, following interpretation of comments made on creationism at Britain's annual science festival.